

PHS corps' future in danger

The long battle for survival of the U.S. Public Health Service's commissioned corps, once the bastion of the government's medical programs, may be drawing to an end—in defeat.

The 5,500 members of the century-old corps, a quasi-military organization of physicians, dentists, nurses, sanitary engineers, and pharmacists with pay rates and ranks paralleling the military, had been hoping that the corps would be revived when the HEW Dept. comes up with its new personnel proposals.

However, Asst. HEW Secretary for Health Merlin DuVal, MD, squelched this prospect recently when he told Congress that HEW "has proposed that an improved civilian career system for health professionals be sought, and, when achieved, that this be the single personnel system utilized by HEW for health professionals."

THE CORPS would be allowed to stay, but only "until such time as a suitably strengthened civilian career system could be achieved."

Dr. DuVal disclosed HEW's plans before a House Armed Services Subcommittee in seeking to provide corps physicians the same extra pay bonus in the works for military physicians. Though this may appear to bolster the corps, Dr. DuVal made it clear it is an interim measure to attract young physicians into the government pending approval of the HEW Dept.'s final personnel plan for physicians.

Despite the clear indications for some time that the military draft might be ended next June—and with it the draft "exemption" upon which HEW has relied to get physicians—the department has floundered in devising a new system to recruit and keep physicians. The decision to ask for a pay raise for the corps was taken at the last minute and with reluctance inasmuch as the last thing the HEW hierarchy wanted was to strengthen the corps concept just as it was moving to kill the corps.

But it had to be done to avoid disaster next spring when the military will be trying to sign up young physicians with the lure of extra pay ranging up to \$17,000 additional a year.

Many believe the HEW Dept. could get along with far fewer physicians, but to date there has appeared no evidence that the agency is moving along the lines set by Asst. Defense Secretary Richard Wilbur, MD, who wants to concentrate his available medical manpower in medical practice and away from desk jobs.

An HEW advisory committee 15 months ago recommended abolishing the corps, saying that it poses the problem of a dual personnel system, that the reorganization and expansion of HEW's health activities has made it outmoded, and that the hierarchical structure makes it difficult to bring in physicians at high levels.

But the corps remained alive and HEW Secretary Elliot Richardson made no follow through on the so-called Perkins Report because the corps, by law, remained the only way HEW could draw new physicians.

Another factor was the powerful Congressional support of the corps, as evidenced by the recurring resolutions to keep the PHS hospitals open. But the friends in Congress have not prevented the corps from deteriorating to the point where none of the large health agencies—National Institutes of Health, Health Services and Mental Health Administration, Food and Drug Administration—are headed by a corps officer. The corps now is largely a personnel system spread throughout various health agencies.

The corps' fate was sealed in 1966 and 1968 HEW reorganizations which stripped the corps of most of its statutory powers over HEW health activities.